

The Three Stooges Go To Heaven



By 1975, the famous long-running slapstick act of the Three Stooges had ended and few people seemed to have noticed. Where once had existed robust comics now sat decrepit senior citizens, the victims of various old age infirmities. Moe Howard, the oldest at age 77, was afflicted with lung cancer. Perennial "middle Stooge" Larry Fine, 73-years-old, was a stroke victim unable to stand and barely able to move his mouth to speak. He was a permanent resident of the old actors' home, otherwise known as The Motion Picture Country Home and Hospital. Joe DeRita, a rotund comic known to Stooge fans as "Curly Joe," was not much better off even though he was thirteen years younger than Moe. His heart was weak, a condition not benefited by his excessive girth, and he was nearly blind as a fault of diabetes.

The Stooges had, in their prime, stirred up a commotion. They performed pratfalls, tumbles and belly flops. They slapped, slid, climbed, ran, kicked, and danced. The frail body of a septuagenarian is not able to handle that sort of abuse. Years of flexing have worn and loosened cartilage. Ligaments have contracted and hardened with age. Bones have grown brittle, which make them faster to break and slower to heal. Heart, lungs and muscles have become weak. Stamina has diminished to a great extent. Under the circumstances, a

septuagenarian tends to move slowly, stiffly and, most of all, cautiously.



It shouldn't be taken too seriously when a newspaper has a story about an 83-year old marathon runner or a grandmother who just finished scaling a mountain. These stories, as enjoyable as they are, fail to reflect the reality of old age. The fact is that, while people might be cheering on the senior athletes at the

Senior Olympics in Irvine, California, not far from the athletic center is a large retirement complex where the residents are not at all willing to run races. These people knew better, which was something a landscape architect learned while spending a few days with the residents. "When I would go on walks with these old people," he said, "I found that a lot of them would go on a different route on rainy days than on sunny days. . . [because on] rainy days, the leaves from all those beautiful trees that the landscape people had planted would fall on the wet pavement and get real slick. These old people live in terror of falling down and breaking a hip. They've had friends who've broken a hip and gone to the hospital and never come out. Complications. So whatever people think about how beautiful the trees are, the old people think they're dangerous." Anyone who is terrified of falling down and irrevocably shattering a hip would not try executing a pratfall. An old man who fears wet leaves would not willingly put their pinky toe near a slick banana peel.

And, yet, a comeback for the senior Stooges did not seem inconceivable to producer Samuel Sherman, who wanted the old slapstick stars to be the comic relief in a film entitled *The Jet Set*.

Sherman, who had learned to be resourceful making films with little money, was willing to work around the Stooges' disablements just as he had worked around all the other obstacles that got in his way.

As early as 1959, the Stooges acknowledged that they were getting old and couldn't do all the rough stuff they had done before. Jeffrey Forrester wrote in *The Stooges Chronicles*: "In the 1960s, the Stooges relied more on their established comic personalities than violence and roughhouse to get laughs." Leonard Maltin noted of the Stooges' later films: "Clever scripting and direction places the physical burden on others."

The greatest change in the Stooges specifically took place in Moe, who had grown less crabby, bossy and violent. Where Moe would have once bashed a skull or punched a stomach, he now scowled in anger and muttered a colorful threat of violence. The kinder and gentler Moe preferred to defer physical roughness with the statement "Remind me to kill you later." On the rare occasion that Moe struck his partners with an object, it wasn't a pipe wrench that he used but a lighter object like a serving tray or an umbrella.

A few fans thought that the Stooges had, in some ways, improved with age. Forrester asserted, "If anything, the ravages of age enhanced their physical features. Moe really looked like an old crab and Larry's sagging facial features complemented his droopy personality." Besides, the team had come to rely too much on violence as a way to enliven a failing scene. Pointless and excessive violence became an inadequate substitute for funny gags and coherent story lines. Once their violence had dissipated, the Stooges began to display more acting ability and innate charm.

The last time the Stooges worked together was in 1971, when they clowned for a travelogue called *Kook's Tour*. By then, the Stooges had maintained their popular act for close to half a century. They had endured longer than their peers. Longer than Laurel & Hardy. Longer than Abbott & Costello. Longer than the Marx Brothers. Still, the numerous years were evident in their performance. Larry, in particular, looked terribly tired and moved sluggishly. The location work on *Kooks' Tour* had no sooner been completed when Larry suffered his first stroke.

In their long career, the Three Stooges had accumulated innumerable loyal fans, which was what made them of interest to Sherman.

In 1968, Sherman worked with a partner, Al Adamson, to establish a New York-based production and distribution company called Independent-International Pictures. Independent-International's first film, *Satan's Sadists*, had to do with a crazed motorcycle gang that massacres people at a roadside diner. Critic Michael Medved gave one of his Golden Turkey awards to *Satan's Sadists*, which he described as "a smorgasbord of loathsome mayhem and molestation." This biker melodrama, which was produced for \$75,000.00, amazingly grossed ten million dollars. The film's success was largely attributed to ads connecting the massacre in the film to the recent Tate-LaBianca murders.

Independent-International continued to profit with other films even more lurid. It was key to the company's marketing strategy to bypass the major markets of New York and Los Angeles, where booking and promotion were the most expensive. The company made most of their

money, instead, from drive-ins in the South and Midwest.

Sherman had never outgrown a boyhood admiration for westerns and horror films. Prior to becoming a producer, he had worked as the editor of a nostalgic film fan magazine, *Famous Westerns of Filmland*. In 1970, he pursued his interest as a movie enthusiast and film historian to make a film based on Universal's classic horror films. The result, *Dracula vs. Frankenstein*, was not the informed homage that might have been expected. It was, rather, a trashy thriller designed to cash in on the fame of the movie monster kings. Sherman and Adamson created their Frankenstein creature by dressing John Bloom, a 7-foot-tall accountant, in a Woolworth-quality rubber mask. Roger Engel, a curly-haired stockbroker, had his skin covered in clown-white make-up to make him look the undead Dracula. A common complaint of the film has been that parts of Engel's body, including his hands and eyelids, lacked make-up and were clearly the actor's regular skin tone.

Dracula vs. Frankenstein exploited the last survivor of horrordom royalty, Lon Chaney, Jr. The 65-year-old former Wolf Man was morbidly obese and ravaged by years of alcohol abuse. He had been on a downward slide for the last few years. Film critic Matthew Hagy, disheartened to see Chaney in the 1967 fright comedy *Hillbillies in a Haunted House*, wrote, "Chaney acts strangely punch-drunk and looks easily 100 lbs. over his Wolf Man weight." In *Dracula vs. Frankenstein*, Chaney plays axe-wielding zombie henchman Groton. The actor, looking bloated and sweaty, makes sporadic appearances in the film, mainly prowling under a boardwalk and decapitating young women. □

J. Carrol Nash, another actor well-known to horror fans, appeared in the film as Dr. Frankenstein. The septuagenarian character actor, who

was suffering from emphysema, portrayed the infamous doctor from the confines of a wheelchair.

Leonard Maltin classified *Dracula vs. Frankenstein* as a "BOMB," dismissing the film as a "Self-conscious comedy masquerading as a horror film wasting the talents of old-timers Naish and Chaney."

Chaney was obviously considering *Dracula vs. Frankenstein* when, in a 1972 interview, he stated: "I used to enjoy horror films when there was thought and sympathy involved. Then they became comedies. Abbott and Costello ruined the horror field: they made buffoons out of the monsters. Then the cheap producers came along and made worse buffoons of them, because they killed for the sake of killing, there was blood for the sake of blood. There was no thought, no true expression of acting, no true expression of feeling. We used to make up our minds before we started that this is a little fantastic, but let's take it seriously. And they were sold seriously. But all this foolishness today, it isn't sold seriously. It's made as a joke, a laugh, for the kids to go in and have a ball."

It made Sherman's efforts to revive the Stooges even more questionable that the producer intended to have these classic clowns and children's favorites visit a Chicken Ranch-style brothel. This is not to say that the women in the Three Stooges' hardboiled world were exactly nuns. The Stooges often encountered gangster molls, chorus girls, gold diggers, and gum-chewing floozies. Curly would greet a playful woman with a libidinous side-glance and a lively call of "Hiya, toots!" She would tickle his chin and remark, "You're kinda cute." Then Curly would blush, draw his jaw to one side, and chatter his teeth as loud as a jackhammer. But Curly never messed with a blow-up doll or

encountered cockpit sex, both of which were part of this script.

Sex had become an important ingredient of Sherman's films since 1973, when Independent-International scored a big hit with a sexploitation film titled *The Naughty Stewardesses*. Before then, Sherman and Adamson avoided blatant sexual material as they feared it would offend their grass roots audience. After all, it was carloads of ordinary families that went to the drive-ins that booked *Satan's Sadists*, *Dracula vs. Frankenstein*, and other Independent-International fare. For years, the company's attempts at sexual titillation were limited to having Adamson's busty wife Regina Carrol show up in a provocative outfit. Carrol was not the most talented actress – her line readings were fairly stilted – but she did have a chest that jiggled a lot and perpetually strained to burst loose from her tight-fitting blouses. Her most memorable work occurred in *Dracula vs. Frankenstein*, where the monster carries her off into the woods. While hanging backwards out of the monster's arms, Carrol exposes a great deal of jiggle chest, which threatens at any moment to spill out of her top. But then *The Naughty Stewardesses* proved that audiences enjoyed topless women and simulated sex. Within three years, *The Naughty Stewardesses* grossed three and a half million dollars from U.S. and Canadian rentals. The film was second only to *Satan's Sadists* in the profits it earned for the company.

Sherman insisted that *The Naughty Stewardesses* was not a "nudie." He contended that the film maintained "certain standards of taste" and, beyond what his promotion suggested, he was "not dependent on blatant thrills to make scenes play." He claimed that, if his company possessed the money for a sustained publicity campaign, they would not need to use exciting titles and titillating posters to grab peoples'

attention right away. Still, most viewers would classify the R-rated *The Naughty Stewardesses* as soft-core pornography. Movie veteran Bob Livingston, who starred in the film, did not hesitate to call *The Naughty Stewardesses* "a dirty picture."

In 1974, Sherman set out to produce a sequel to *The Naughty Stewardesses*, originally to be called *The Jet Set*. By now, the maximum budget of an Independent-International production was \$250,000. The shooting schedule never exceeded four weeks. Sherman and Adamson endeavored, as always, to use quick wit in place of time and money.

Sherman got the idea for the film one Sunday morning, when he turned on his television in time to see *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, a 1942 western comedy starring Abbott and Costello. Sherman had seen this movie several times as a boy. But it was different this time. Now, as a producer, he recognized an appealing basis for a film. *Ride 'Em Cowboy*, which placed Abbott and Costello on an Arizona dude ranch, was an old-fashioned Hollywood hodgepodge, intermingling comedy routines, romance and western action. By the time the film reached its climax - a gun duel and horse chase - he had decided to put his lusty airline hostesses on a dude ranch.

Sherman realized to recreate this forties' pop myth, complete with hero, heroine, villain and comic relief, he would need to use actual stars from the era.

Sherman already had his old-time western hero. He called Bob Livingston. In the 1940's, Livingston had been the robust and ruggedly handsome star of dozens of westerns. He had been the Lone Ranger. He had been Zorro. He had been Stony Brooke, the leader of the Three

Mesquiteers, in twenty-nine westerns for Republic Pictures. At 66-years-old, Livingston could still be described as heroic-looking.

Sherman exerted a mysterious influence over Livingston. Since 1958, the actor had been reclusive. He granted no interviews and refused to humor fans who invaded his privacy. Above a small bench in his garden was a sign that read, simply, "I hate people." Maybe it was Sherman's boyish enthusiasm and his unabashed idolization of the cowboy star, but he had managed to convince the actor to play business tycoon Ben Brewster in *The Naughty Stewardesses*. When asked why he took this role, Livingston simply stated: "Sam Sherman wanted me to do it, so I did it." It is also worth noting, however, that Livingston seems elated in his sex scene with starlet Mikel James.

Livingston, regardless of his motives, now agreed to reprise the role of Ben Brewster. According to Sherman's new story line, the business tycoon would now act as the promoter of a gambling ranch.

Sherman acquired Yvonne DeCarlo as his western heroine. DeCarlo was a one-time Calamity Jane. She had also been the star of *Frontier Gal*, a memorable 1945 western in which she played a sultry saloon queen. Sherman envisioned DeCarlo as Honey Morgan, a seductive and wise-cracking madam who tries to recruit the stewardesses for her swingers' ranch.

The story's western villain, the head of a gang of hooded riders, would be played by Don Barry. Barry, another veteran cowboy star, had been the lead in the classic Republic serial *The Adventures of Red Ryder*.

Sherman proceeded smoothly until it came to deciding who he should

use as comic relief. He wanted a classic act that would maintain *The Jet Set's* nostalgic motif. However, most of those acts were no longer around. Sherman couldn't think who was left and he soon turned to Joe Franklin, the king of entertainment nostalgia, for an answer.

"There's only one guy in the world to talk to," said Franklin, "and that's Harry Ritz."

Harry Ritz, as the leader of the wildly comic Ritz Brothers, had gotten big laughs with his rolling eyes and pliable face. Harry, Al and Jimmy Ritz had performed together for thirty-seven years. When Al died in 1965, his siblings continued briefly as a duo.

"How do I get him?" asked Sherman.

"Harry Ritz is elusive," replied Franklin, "but, don't worry, I know him very well. I'll contact him for you."

Joe Franklin knew all acts, big and small. His office was usually crammed with an assortment of white-haired minor entertainers, both the puffy eccentrics and the diehard never-beens.

Sherman became worried when he didn't hear back from Franklin. He called around to find Harry Ritz on his own, but he eventually had to return to Franklin, who admitted that he could not find what he did with Harry's phone number.

Sherman said that he kept trying to come up with another idea. "I said, 'I know Larry Fine is sick. I don't think the Three Stooges are possible for a movie, but why give up? Why not figure out a way they could be in

a movie and maybe we could shoot around Larry Fine and fake it." Sherman stuck by the old adage "Where there's a will, there's a way." He remained determined to overcome the obstacles that interfered with him pressing the Three Stooges into service.

Sherman started out by attacking his biggest problem. He called Larry Fine at the old actors' home.

Since 1971, Larry had become optimistic that he would recover and walk again. He performed jokes and songs at high school and colleges in the San Fernando Valley area. He had regained enough control to be able to stand up from his wheelchair, a feat he liked to demonstrate for the audiences that came to see him. He also performed a nonstrenuous role in his retirement home's annual show. But he was still a long way from recovery, which was apparent when Larry got on the phone.

"Hel-lo," he said. The simple word, just two syllables, arrived slowly and thickly.

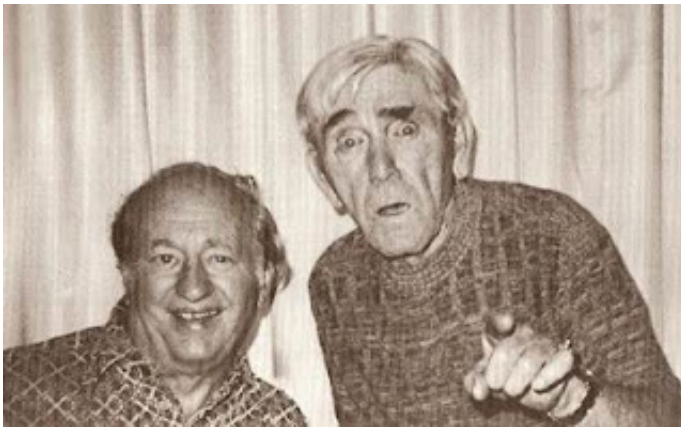
Sherman was eager to gain Larry's confidence. He praised the old comic's work. He tried, with each passing word, to knead away this frail man's tension. When Larry seemed receptive, he got to the point. "Do you think you, Moe and Joe DeRita would like to be in this movie we're making?"

"I'm not well," said Larry.

The words, as smudgy as they were, conveyed despair and doubt. Larry thought that this was a good time to mention to Sherman his inability to walk. Sherman assured Larry, "We'll shoot around it in some

way. We'll fake it. You'll be sitting through the entire film. Would you be in my movie, Larry?"

Sherman would later say: "I had an idea for Larry Fine that was great. We were going to have a health club at the ranch. . . [Moe and Joe] were going to bring Larry to the ranch, pushing him in a wheelchair, and when he would come to this health club to be rejuvenated, he would see the girls and chase them around in a motorized wheelchair. And the other two guys would run to catch him. It was all kinds of crazy things like that. This seemed a way to use Larry Fine, to write the story with the wheelchair in it, to have Moe and Joe DeRita carry the action."



Larry said, "Call Moe."

Since Larry's middle Stooge role was limited, Sherman's idea might have been feasible.

Forrester wrote, "Larry's contribution to the act was

limited to getting pushed and

looking happy, unhappy, or confused about the situation at hand." It had always been Larry's job to get caught in-between the rowdy antics of his more outstanding partners. However, nothing was funny about a ham-handed director like Adamson, the maker of *Dracula vs.*

Frankenstein, propelling a partially paralyzed stroke victim around the set in a wheelchair to chase women.

Preparing to call Moe, Sherman braced himself. He imagined that Moe, much like his impressive screen alter ego, was bossy, crusty, violent and insulting. Sure, Moe couldn't poke him in the eyes long distance

but he could call the producer "numbskull."

Moe, though enfeebled by age and often in pain, was a restless retiree. Lately, he had been spending most of his time writing an autobiography. He had also been campaigning against a mounting boycott of the Stooges' comedies. Groups that condemned the Stooges for their violence were getting one television station after another to drop the Stooges from their program schedules. This must have been hard for Moe. It must have looked to him as if his legacy was going to be buried with him. But he did what he could to oppose them. He no longer had the celebrity status to bring his cause to a national forum like *The Tonight Show*, but he was able to speak out on local radio stations.

Although finding ways to keep busy, Moe was still not satisfied. He would have loved nothing more than to be able to perform again. Joe DeRita had recently invited him to join him and Paul "Mousie" Garner in a nightclub act, but Moe's wife refused to allow her ailing husband to tour. Frank Mitchel, an old-time comic who had performed routines even more acrobatic and violent than the Stooges' act, assumed Moe's place in the act. Billed as "The New Three Stooges," DeRita, Garner and Mitchel debuted their show in Boston. While initial response was enthusiastic, DeRita's failing health soon caused the team to disband.

Moe remained receptive to work even if a job entailed performing a scaled-down version of his old act. For him, Sherman's offer appeared like a spring in a desert. He listened attentively to what this producer had to offer.

"I'm telling you," Sherman said, "there are many people who would love

to see the Three Stooges make a comeback."

"Yeah," Moe said in a guarded voice, "we might like to do it."

Sherman was relieved. He later remarked, with much surprise, "Moe was *nice* on the phone!"

Moe directed Sherman to Norman Maurer, his manager and son-in-law. Sherman and Maurer were able to come to an agreement the same day.

Possessing serious doubts about Larry's condition, Sherman scripted scenes exclusively for Moe and Curly Joe. Comprising pages 47 and 48 of *The Jet Set* script was the following notes:

ADDITIONAL NOTES - POSSIBLE COMEDY SEQUENCES

If THE THREE STOOGES are present in the film as comedy relief, the following suggestions and ideas are possible scenes, or other similar sequences can be written later.

1 - The Three Stooges are shabbily dressed Hobos, walking down a dusty Western road. They are carrying packs on their backs with all their possessions. They complain about being hungry then stop and see a sign at the side of the road- "LUCKY DOLLAR RANCH" - NEW VACATION RESORT - GRAND OPENING. They discuss the fact that the ranch must need a health club supervisor and Masseur (Curly Joe) and a Hair Stylist (Moe) etc. They prepare to open their packs and change into more appropriate attire to "get" jobs.

2 - At the Ranch Open House, Brewster can introduce his staff - Foreman, Chef, Tennis Pro, Riding Instructor etc. The Three Stooges would run the Health Club and Hair Stylist Shop.

Possible Scene:

A modish young man comes into the Hair Stylist shop. He is rich and has just returned from Monte Carlo. He has shoulder-length hair. Moe is the barber, and once the man is in the chair, he tells Moe that he wants a "layered shag cut." Moe cuts it pretty ragged, telling Joe it looks "shaggy."

Then they give the man a "hot towel" and burn his face. We see it beet RED when the towel is removed. Then Piazafication of the face with pizza treatments. Moe next uses an electric razor and cuts a path right through the middle of the man's hair. The man next asks for the ends to be singed. Moe says "We always singe" and takes a Zippo lighter out of his pocket and lights the ends of the hair. He has to quickly smother the smoldering ends out. To cover the path in the center of the hair, he combs the sides upswept over the center. This scene can be intercut with Curly Joe giving "Health Treatment" massage to someone else.

☐ 3 - Later in the film - Possible scene - Rich Blonde comes in to have hair done. She wants "hot curl" on one side and a "flip" in the front. She's very demanding. Moe says, "I'd like to give her a flip!" etc. He asks her to relax, then chloroforms her. He cuts off most of her hair and then shaves off the rest ("Bald" cap used here).

Moe then calls in Curly Joe, telling him he made it too short - "Bring in

your shoe shine kit." He paints on a black hairdo with shoe polish. Gal wakes up and he tells her "it's the latest rage. You don't have to comb it - just polish once a week."

Some of the principal characters in the cast will be worked into these routines, to tie THE THREE STOOGES into the plot directly."

On October 4, 1974, Larry suffered another stroke and was placed in an intensive care unit. Two weeks later, he was alert and talking again, but his speech was more garbled and slurred than before. Then, he suffered a massive stroke which put him into a coma. He died two weeks later on January 24, 1975.

News of Larry's death sent Sherman into a panic. He phoned Maurer. "What can I do?" he said. "I'd love to have Moe and Joe DeRita in the picture, but I can't have *two Stooges!*"

Maurer sought to reassure Sherman.

"We were working on an idea," he explained. "You know Emil Sitka, right? Emil looks like Larry. We could have him replace Larry. We could call him Harry."

Sitka, a character comedian, had been part of the Stooges' stock company since 1947. He knew the Stooges' act well and he was a familiar face to Stooges' fans.

Sherman remained cautious discussing Maurer's idea. Maurer offered to assemble the new Stooges for a photo shoot to let Sherman see how

they looked together.

Days later, Moe, Joe and Emil showed up in a photography studio to get to work. They were dressed up in garish sports jackets – Moe's jacket had leopard print, Joe's had plaid print, and Emil's had an Asian floral print. Emil's hair was frizzed up to make him look more like Larry. The trio was provided with props, including an oversized clothespin, to help them be funny.

Maurer was excited with the pictures he got that day. He released the photos to the press announcing that the Three Stooges were getting ready to star in a series of feature-length comedies.

Sherman, too, became excited when he saw the pictures.

Weeks later, Sherman, Maurer, Moe Howard and writer John R. D'Amato met at the Sheraton-Universal Hotel, which was located in North Hollywood near Moe's home. Moe appeared thin and sickly at the meeting. His voice barely rose above a whisper. For much of the morning, he worked with Sherman and D'Amato to come up with scenes. Sherman was enthused by Moe, who impressed him as being "a wonderful, lovely, great guy."

Moe wanted a part of the New Three Stooges' nightclub act to be added to the Open House scene. He said that, after performing a song called "We're Back Again," he and Joe could exchange the following lines:

Moe: "How was this song written?"

Joe: "I wrotten it!"

Moe: "What do you mean you '*wrotten* it?' It's *rotten*!"

It was resolved that, in their main appearance, the Three Stooges would provide a disastrous mud pack treatment and brutal rubdown to Regina Carrol.

Later joining Moe, Maurer and Sherman for lunch were DeRita and Sitka. Sitka expected Moe to demand extensive rehearsal, but Moe remained quiet when Sitka brought up the subject.

Days later, Sitka phoned Moe to recommend that they schedule a "run through." Moe promptly rejected the plan, assuring Sitka that they could accomplish the scenes without rehearsal. "We can wing it," he insisted.

Shooting began at the White Sun Guest Ranch, located near Palm Springs, California. The Stooges were not due at the production site until the third day of filming.

Sherman phoned Moe the next day. He started out telling Moe that the crew was excited to know he was on his way. Then, he told Moe about a rubber leg he had rented. He thought that it would be funny for Moe to have the leg to twist in circles during the rubdown scene. Moe did not have much to say. Sherman then tried to confirm Moe's flight plans, at which point Moe became evasive.

"I don't want to fly," he said.

Sherman did not know how to react to this surprising news. "So," he

said, "we'll have someone drive you."

"I don't want to drive."

Sherman became flustered. "Well," he said, his voice cracking, "you can't walk to here from L.A.!"

Moe didn't reply.

Sherman paused, trying to compose himself. Then he asked if anything was wrong.

Moe didn't answer.

"How do you plan on getting here today?" persisted Sherman.

"I can't come today at all," he said. "I have a bad cold."

"Do you think you'll be able to come tomorrow?"

"I don't know."

Uncertain if his film would have its essential comic relief, Sherman fretted throughout the night. He might have suspected the graveness of Moe's illness if he had known that, in sixty years of performing, Moe had never missed a single performance.

The following day, Moe notified Sherman that he could not leave home at this time. The news that Moe was too sick to work caught Sitka by surprise. Sitka said, "I had my bags packed and was set to film on

location."

Sherman and Adamson shot around the Stooges.

"After a week of production," Sherman explained, "I closed the picture down and pulled everybody out of Palm Springs. We went back to Los Angeles and waited for Moe to recover from this cold."

Over the next few days, Sherman regularly phoned Moe.

Moe was contrite. "I'm sorry," he said. "I feel so bad. I'm weak. I don't know what it is, but I just hope I can lick it and get better." Moe assured Sherman, "I don't want you to think I'm not doing your picture because I'm doing other things." He explained that, the day before, he had to cancel an appointment with the editor of his autobiography. He said that the only reason he wanted to do the film was so that he didn't let Sherman down.

Sherman said, "I was very pleased that he felt that way, [but] unfortunately, he got sicker and sicker. . . It eventually got to the point where I said I was willing to make any concession. I said, 'We'll come to your house and carry the action with Joe DeRita and Emil. All I need you for is a couple of hours. Will you do it?' Moe said, 'Maybe.'"

Sherman, by trying to get into Moe's home to shoot footage of Moe in bed, was showing just how desperate he was to get the Stooges into his film. However, Moe's condition went from bad to worse and nobody was willing to tell Sherman what the problem was. Finally, Maurer notified Sherman, "I don't think he'll be able to do it."

Moe, who was suffering the later effects of lung cancer, was soon hospitalized. He died on May 4, 1975.

Sherman briefly considered acquiring Joe Besser, who had briefly worked as a Stooge in the late fifties, but he could not see this plan working. He knew that he needed Moe to legitimately use the Three Stooges' name.

"What kind of thing would that have been?" said Sherman. "Joe Besser is the same as Joe DeRita. It's two fat ones and one skinny one, and they're really not the Three Stooges. Without Moe, there was no way of doing it."

With his last plan to resurrect the Three Stooges proving unacceptable, Sherman pursued other options. "I spent several weeks in L.A. trying to figure who to get to replace them," he said. "Thought of Jonathan Winters, Donald O'Connor, Mickey Rooney. All of these people either wouldn't work in the picture or wanted tremendous money."

Sherman was about to quit or use unknown comics when he remembered the Ritz Brothers. It occurred to him that, in his search for the Ritz Brothers, he had not left every stone unturned. He had, in fact, neglected to contact the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, an actor's union that the brothers would have had to have joined years ago to work on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *Colgate Comedy Hour*.

Sherman asked the union if their records included a listing for Harry or Jimmy. He was told that, according to their records, the Ritz Brothers

could be reached through "WARSK." This person wasn't familiar with WARSK, but they at least had a phone number for the organization.

Sherman no sooner dialed up the number then someone picked up the phone and said hello. Sherman's response was quick and enthusiastic.

"Hello, my name is Sam Sherman. I'm trying to contact the Ritz Brothers. Who am I speaking to?"

The voice that came back was excited and defensive. "Who are you?! What do you want from them?!!"

By now, Sherman was exasperated. "What's this all about?" he demanded. He explained that he was the president of Independent-International Pictures. "I'm trying to find the Ritz Brothers and AFTRA's listing for them only gives this number and the name WARSK!"

The voice at the other end of the line discernibly calmed. "I'm Jimmy Ritz," he said.

Harry and Jimmy Ritz agreed to appear in *The Jet Set* as "down-on-their-luck adventurers." They would create comical chaos as chefs, golf pros and life guards.

Sherman said, "To figure how to integrate themselves in the film, Harry and Jimmy looked at what had been shot, and then added their kind of bits."

The Ritz Brothers are featured in a total of five scenes.

Early in the film, Harry and Jimmy are introduced walking down a dusty road. Harry tries to hitch a ride by baring one of his scrawny legs. When this fails to work, he lies in the middle of the road and pretends to suffer an epileptic seizure. He uses his trademark rolling eyes to put across his seizure. Harry, acting in a hostile and commanding way with his more passive brother, seems to be trying to imitate Moe Howard. He sometimes shouts his lines as if thinking this will make them funnier. Other times, he randomly lapses into an effeminate lisp.

Upon arriving at the ranch, Harry teaches one of the stewardesses to golf. While standing behind the curvaceous young lady to show her how to swing, he cannot resist groping select areas of her body.

Later, Harry and Jimmy are intercut with footage of a rodeo shot earlier at the ranch. The brothers, pretending to look at the rodeo action, provide running commentary. Jimmy's faint remarks are hopelessly drowned out by Harry's constant shouting. Harry randomly cries, "No, you gotta stay on, you're not allowed to fall off." He does funny voices, including an unconvincing Southern accent. "Tex," he hoots, "stay on, damn you!" As the scene closes, Harry talks about how difficult it is to clean the filth out of the riders' underwear after one of these rodeos.

Harry calms down for the Open House scene, which features the brothers performing one of their old eccentric dances.

Harry and Jimmy's final scene is at a pool. The brothers, as lifeguards, must dive into the pool to rescue Regina Carrol from drowning. Harry, wrapping his bony arms around Carrol's voluptuous body, has a hard time pulling her out of the pool. She soon faints, becoming pure dead

weight in his frail grip.

Harry and Jimmy are not much of a team in the film. Harry strains to be funny with excessive mugging and a constant stream of non sequiturs while Jimmy simply keeps out of his way.

In the time that the Ritz Brothers worked for him, Sherman never did learn what WARSK stood for.

To capitalize on the recent success of Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, Independent-International dropped the *Jet Set* title in favor of calling the film *The Blazing Stewardesses*. The headline of one ad read: "*The Blazing Stewardesses* outblazes *Blazing Saddles*!" Other ads alleged that the film "out-panthers *Pink Panther*" and "out-sexes [Woody Allen's] *Everything You Wanted to Know*."

In press releases for *The Blazing Stewardesses*, Independent-International boasted relentless zaniness and action. However, these boasts were hollow. The action sequences are, for the most part, clumsily paced. The height of zany humor occurs in a mile-high bathroom, where a drunken pilot is attempting to vomit and ends up getting the cover of the toilet seat stuck on his head.

Sherman's objective to make the film a homage to classic movies is reflected in the film's opening dedication, which is devoted "to the screen's unsung directors, performers and stuntmen of a bygone era - when movies entertained with simplicity and the world forgot its cares."

The original Three Stooges, who left behind a great legacy, did not completely pass away. The boycott groups managed to keep the Stooges out of sight for nearly a decade, but this had not been the bitter end as Moe might have feared. The team had a vast resurgence when their comedies were released on videotape. On January 4, 1984, Stephen M. Silverman wrote in the New York Post: "N'yuk, n'yuk, n'yuk to George Orwell: 1984 may go down as the year of the Three Stooges. . . [T]he old-time comedy trio is experiencing a renaissance equal to if not surpassing that of the Marx Brothers in the early '70s." The Stooges were now the subjects of national fan clubs, film festivals, books, T-shirts, and dolls.

Maurer, who held exclusive rights to the Three Stooges, announced in the spring of 1984 that Columbia Pictures would be producing a feature-length Three Stooges series. It was reported that Columbia would conduct a national talent search to cast the new Moe, Larry and Curly for a spy spoof entitled *003 Stooges*. Despite an enthusiastic response to the announcement, the series never did materialize.

The Stooges are permanently embedded in our culture. Evidence of their influence has materialized in a wide variety of places.

The Stooges' likeness has been used in advertisements for everything from lawn mowers to milk. In a Lipton Original Ice Tea commercial, David Carradine set aside his usual kicks and karate chops for Stooge Fu, defeating foes with eye pokes and windmill noggin conks.

On the big screen, Mel Gibson starred as a Stooges-obsessed action hero in the *Lethal Weapon* franchise. These films were peppered with as many Stooge references as bullets. Gibson, a longtime Stooges fan,

later attended the MTV Movie Awards to honor the Stooges posthumously with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Gibson also produced a television biopic on the team.

The Ren and Stimpy cartoons had the Three Stooges among its primary influences. This might not be readily apparent because the pair is more commonly known for their gross-out humor, which involved noise-picking, vomit and farts. But there can be found, below the bodily waste, the Stooges. Stimpy's voice, delivered by Billy West, was an unabashed imitation of Larry Fine. Ren, a short-tempered and violent Chihuahua with a Teutonic accent and wildly bulging eyes, was part Peter Lorre and part Moe Howard. He slapped his pudgy, dim-witted partner as often as Moe slapped his pudgy, dim-witted partner Curly. He, in fact, developed his own unique variation of Moe's legendary eye poke. Because Stimpy's big, floppy nose stood in the way of him reaching up to poke Stimpy in the eyes, he had to get to Stimpy's eyes by poking his fingers up through Stimpy's nostrils.

Ren & Stimpy's creator, John Kricfalusi, designed these Three Stooges dolls for release through his Spumco toy company.

Last month, the Farrelly brothers completed a long-awaited screenplay for a new Three Stooges movie.



And, it goes without saying, Columbia continues to profit from the Stooges' old comedies, which were only recently remastered for DVD.

Without a doubt, the Stooges will still be popular in the age of holograms.

The Stooges managed to escape a finale as lamentable and dishonorable as *The Blazing Stewardesses* and they have since gone on to Hollywood Heaven and well-deserved immortality.

